Anne Dallas Dudley:
Making Suffrage Fashionable

Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives

Anne Dallas Dudley was beautiful, articulate, and privileged; a wife and the mother of two daughters, she enlisted in the crusade for women's rights, laboring for nearly ten years in a hard fought campaign to achieve woman suffrage. Unlike the pioneers of woman suffrage, Dudley embodied a new generation of feminist leaders that emerged in the progressive era. Dudley represented a living refutation of the negative anti-suffrage argument that women's rights advocates were both unattractive male-haters and childless radicals bent on destroying the idea of the traditional American family.

Born into a wealthy Middle Tennessee family, Dudley was raised and educated at Ward Seminary and Price's College in Nashville as a belle of the post-Civil War New South. Her father, Trevanion B. Dallas, prospered as he joined a leading mercantile firm and began to build and buy cotton mills in Nashville and southward in Huntsville, Alabama. His support of the Confederacy during the Civil War helped open doors to him upon his arrival in Tennessee's state capital in 1869.

His daughter created a buzz in social circles as her gowns, parties, and her beaus became material for the gossip columns. In 1902, she married widower Guilford Dudley, a prominent

local banker and insurance broker (one of the founders of the Life and Casualty Insurance Company) and maintained a country estate in West Nashville.

Proper Victorian notions of a woman's sphere were instilled in her as part of an unspoken education. Dudley later acknowledged that prior to her involvement in the woman suffrage campaign, she had once been an anti-suffragist. "But reading and studying showed me that it was the only way that women could come into their own…. Not only does the world need women's votes, but woman needs the ballot for her own development."

Like several other middle and upper class women, Dudley joined local groups in which women met for self-improvement. Typically, these groups of women discussed art, books, music, and drama. Later, the meetings evolved into discussions concerning problems of urban living that were consequences of industrialization. They concerned themselves with the education of children, poverty, political corruption, and working conditions of women and children. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century's progressive female leaders originated within these societies. They began to argue that women needed the vote in order to cure and purify the ills of American society.

This notion reflected a subtle but important change in the thrust of the woman suffrage movement that Dudley and other middle and upper class would enlist in. Earlier generations had insisted that women were fundamentally equal to men; however, a new generation of Progressive era suffragists argued that women were different from men. Many of the movement's new leaders began to couch their language and justification for suffrage in less threatening ways that did not overtly challenge the separate spheres in which men and women resided in late nineteenth-century American society. By doing so, they ignored the natural constraints of their position to speak with great force and persuasion. Women, they stressed, possessed a moral sense and a nurturing quality that men naturally lacked. Consequently, they understood the civic obligations implied by the franchise and could be trusted to vote virtuously. Their votes would hasten to completion the progressive task of cleansing the political process of corruption. Moreover, their experience as mothers and household managers would enable them to guide local and state governments in efforts to improve education, sanitation, family wholesomeness, and the condition of women and children in the workforce.

In September 1911, Dudley enlisted in the woman suffrage cause when she and a handful of other Nashville women formed the Nashville Equal Suffrage League. The League nominated Dudley as its president, who set about to link up with other equally committed women throughout the state to organize similar local organizations. Between 1911 and 1919, they helped found suffrage organizations in 78 towns in Tennessee. The suffragists throughout the state followed Dudley's lead to institute May Day parades throughout their cities and towns. Dudley often led these parades with her two young daughters. She was also photographed reading to her children, which was widely distributed among other woman suffrage materials, all in an effort to rebuke negative stereotypes created by anti-suffragists that all suffragists were mannish and disregarded their children.

In 1915, Dudley was elected as the president of the Tennessee Equal Suffrage Association. She was instrumental in arranging for some of the nation's most prominent

women's rights advocates to visit and speak in Nashville, which rallied support throughout the state for their cause. When a suffrage amendment to the state constitution failed, Dudley introduced a second measure to give women the right to vote in presidential and municipal elections. However, when her second attempt to secure woman suffrage (albeit on a limited scale) failed to pass the state Senate, she proclaimed "We are not cry-babies," and pushed her foot soldiers to push onward. In fact, the alternate bill did pass the General Assembly in 1919; however, at this time, Dudley and other women's rights advocates were consumed with the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment.

Dudley was vitally important to the campaign for woman suffrage primarily for two reasons: she embodied a new (and attractive) generation of progressive era reformers and was an outspoken southern proponent of woman suffrage (a region in which the prospect of woman suffrage was very unpopular). To her southern male (and female) detractors, Dudley countered their hysterical, anxious, and racist arguments that enfranchisement of women would lead to "Negro" domination of the region, with a racist pro-suffrage argument designed to allay their fears: there were more white women than black women. Interestingly, white suffragists, including Dudley and her southern counterparts, crossed the South's Jim Crow racial barricades to enlist black women to join them. One black woman later observed, "a little patience, trust, vision, and the universal ties of motherhood and sisterhood could overcome the prejudice against them as voters."

As Dudley became nationally known for her activities, the National American Woman Suffrage Association elected her as its third vice-president in 1917. As a national spokesperson, Dudley addressed congressional committees and traveled across the nation urging the passage of the Anthony resolution, a federal woman suffrage bill that had been introduced in each session of Congress since 1878. She was a popular speaker who often held her own as she clashed with anti-suffragists on her tours. When the antis noted that since only men could bear arms for their country, only men should vote, Dudley countered, "Yes, but women bear armies."

In 1920, Dudley's public role in national affairs was highlighted as she attended the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco as a delegate-at large where she made a seconding speech for one of the party's candidates. As she walked across the stage, on her way to the podium to make her speech, the band struck up "Oh, You Beautiful Doll."

In August of that same year, Dudley successfully worked to achieve the ratification of the 19th Amendment by the Tennessee General Assembly. She continued her political involvement through the fall of 1920 as a volunteer in the unsuccessful reelection campaign of Democratic Governor Albert H. Roberts, who later blamed his support of woman suffrage for his defeat.

Though she was never active in the newly created League of Women Voters, Dudley helped organize the Woman's Civic League of Nashville to assist elected officials in a needed "municipal house-cleaning." More than thirty-five years before the passage of metropolitan government in Nashville, this group fought for an end to overlapping city efforts and public education on health issues. In the 1930s Dudley served as president of the Maternal Welfare Organization of Tennessee, which brought Margaret Sanger to Nashville in 1938 to increase

public awareness on the importance of birth control.

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